

Jean Crocker shares her experiences of defending Women's Conference as a democratic decision-making organisation in the Labour Party.

I've been on the Women's Conference Arrangements Committee (Women's CAC) for seven years, and am currently Vice-Chair. Things were far from clear at first on the new Committee. At the meeting on motions in 2018, we came into a room with a huge pile of papers at each place, and we had to decide if they were in order at that one meeting. We asked for an electronic copy for the next year! I'm standing for re-election this year, but in the meantime I've set down some things I've learned which will be useful to CLP women in particular, and to future members of Women's CAC committed to a democratic Women's Conference.



Who are the elected members of Women's CAC?

- Three CLP members elected by Women's Conference CLP delegates;
- Three members put forward by unions;
- A representative from Labour Party Conference Arrangements Committee (CAC), who has so far always been a union representative, so the CLP representatives have been in a minority.

Union representatives can be good allies of CLP representatives; and the unions can be very generous, eg by offering to fund fringes and other networking events.

Who decides if motions are 'in order'?

The only democratic answer is: the elected representatives on Women's

CAC. It's our role and duty. For that to happen, several things need to be in place:

- Time for elected members to read the motions. If we aren't allocated enough time, pressure is created to rely more on Party advice. All depends on the pre-Conference 'democratic timetable'. By rule this is decided by the National Women's Committee (NWC) in consultation with Women's CAC. It didn't happen in 2023, though we did eventually get a weekend to read the motions after making strong representations. This year we weren't shown a plan until late July, with three days allocated to read the motions.
- Understanding what the rules do and do not exclude. For example, an argument was put for ruling against a motion because it was not well constructed. But there is no rule to say it must be well constructed! I've led on analysing the rules, and we had a helpful meeting with the Chair of the Labour Party CAC, which provided the useful clarification that there were no hidden rules unknown to us.

- Moving to a vote by the elected members, rather than continuing a discussion ad infinitum.

Can the Women's CAC decisions be overruled?

It's important that Women's CAC is independent, and answerable only to those who elected us. But in 2023, the National Executive Committee (NEC) overruled both the Women's CAC and the Labour Party CAC. In our case this was because information had been sent out that omitted the requirement for motions to be relevant to women. We made considerable efforts to get the correct information out, but it only reached CLPs right at the end of the process. So we found several motions to be in order that did not refer specifically to women, since the CLPs had

Women's Conference 2024

Women's CAC Elections

Please vote for the following Centre Left Grassroots Alliance candidates:

- Zoe Allan, Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe CLP;
- Jean Crocker, Gateshead Central and Whickham CLP;
- Rathi Guhadasan, Brent East CLP.

kept to the rules as given. We were then told that we had been overruled by the NEC.

The Labour Party CAC reported that they were told that they won't be overruled again, and we hope the Women's CAC won't be overruled either. If it does, it's important to try to inform Conference what has happened.

Who decides which topics are debated at Conference?

Motions are put into topic groups by the Women's CAC, and these go into a 'priorities ballot' where the CLP delegates and the unions each decide an equal number of topics. If they both choose the same topic, it hasn't yet been satisfactorily resolved as to who gets to add another preferred topic. The unions co-operate, quite rightly as solidarity is their strength, and topic groups which include union motions always get through the ballot. If CLP motions are grouped with union motions, they will get through too. But some of the groups which only include CLP motions fall by the wayside.

CLP representatives on the Women's CAC should therefore try to ensure that as many CLP motions as possible reach Women's Conference, while of course maintaining fair decisions. Ways to do this are:

■ Push for implementation of the rule that the Women's CAC decides the number of motion debates; then press for a good number of debates, so that there is room for more motions. At the two-day Women's Conferences, we had eight motion debates. When we were cut to one day in 2023, there was pressure to have only four. But we held firm on six, which increased the number of grassroots CLP voices heard; and the same has happened in 2024. We are calling for a return to a two-day stand-alone Women's Conference in 2025.

■ When putting motions into topic groups, try to avoid having too many small groups with only a few motions in each (as far as makes sense, given the actual motions that come in). For example, I would advocate for a larger group on Women's Health rather than several small groups on different aspects of women's health, other things being equal. This is because only six groups will be successful in the priorities ballot, and if they are all small groups competing with each other, fewer CLP motions will reach Women's Conference.

Who decides what goes into a 'composite motion'?

The only democratic answer is: the delegates of the CLPs and affiliates (unions and socialist societies) who have put forward motions on the topic. There is a compositing meeting for them to merge the motions into one composite motion (sometimes two).

There is usually a front-bench MP there to advise, and sometimes they have strong views. A member of Women's CAC is the Chair, there is a Policy Officer, and there may be others present. But the wording of the motions is not in our hands, but in the delegates' hands.

To ensure that this happens:

■ The Chair should make it clear that, though there may be advice, the wording is up to the delegates. I repeat this during the meeting if it seems needed. For me, the Chair's role is to ensure that those who want to speak get a chance to do so, while not taking part at all in the debate herself.

■ The Delegates' Guide must also make it clear that delegates make the decision (and the wording was made more explicit in 2023).

Increased constraints on motions

Unions send one motion each to Annual Women's Conference, and they are always in order. The vast majority of motions, and all those found out of order, are from CLPs. Busy CLP volunteers mostly do not have access to professional advice, so increased constraints on motions work against them.

At the 2023 Conference there was a return to greater restrictions on motions in an amendment which said "...CLPs may submit one motion to Conference which is not substantially addressed by reports of the NEC or NPF [National Policy Forum] to Conference", so requiring a detailed reading of two documents before writing a motion. The same has been applied to Women's Conference, although it isn't a rule change agreed by Women's Conference.

Emails modifying the requirements for 2024 were sent out on the 17th and 26th July this year. They gave conflicting information, but in summary, for Women's Conference 2024, a motion must comply with the following:

- On an issue that relates to Women;
- On one subject;
- No more than 250 words in length;
- Not on an organisational matter;
- On an issue that has arisen after Friday 5th July 2024.

The last rule was probably intended as a helpful simplification, but it appeared too late to give Women's branches and CLPs reasonable time, especially in the holiday period, to organise quorate meetings before the deadline of 12 noon on 21st August.

The Women's CAC report

This should be an important part of accountability, but the point at which Women's CAC members see it has varied from year to year. In 2023 most members of the committee didn't see it at all until the morning of Women's Conference itself. A request has been made for 2024 that the Women's CAC members see a draft much earlier, and this has been heard.

A policy-making Conference

Motions passed at Labour Conference should become policy. Motions

sent there from Women's Conference and passed should also carry that weight. Even though this is not how things are now, Women's Conference gives opportunities for women to express views, change minds, and hopefully influence Party policy. All motions passed at Annual Women's Conference are the policy of our Conference, and as such should enter the agenda of the National Women's Committee.

Jean Crocker is a member of Gateshead Central and Whickham CLP and the CLPD Executive. She is also Vice-Chair Women's CAC, writing in a personal capacity, and is happy to answer queries: please email her at clpdwomen@gmail.com

Conference 2024 CLPD Conference fringe meetings

Briefings and updates for delegates and attendees on composites, ballots, and rule changes – and much more. All are at the Friends Meeting House, 22 School Lane, Liverpool L1 3BT.

Eve of Women's Conference:
5-6pm, Friday 20th Sep.

Party Democracy – The Key to Labour's Success in Government

6.30pm, Saturday 21st Sep.
Speakers include Richard Burgon MP, Carol Mochan MSP, Mish Rahman (NEC), Jess Barnard (NEC).

Review of Conference:
6.30pm, Tuesday, 24th Sep.
Speakers include Bell Ribeiro-Addy MP, Jess Barnard, Mish Rahman.

All welcome. Not to be missed!

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